

Bearden

Author(s): Ralph Ellison

Source: *Callaloo*, No. 36 (Summer, 1988), pp. 416-419

Published by: [Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2931506>

Accessed: 31-12-2015 19:59 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Callaloo*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

BEARDEN*

By Ralph Ellison

Let me begin by saying that Romie frequently got me into trouble. Nothing physical, mind you, but difficulties arising out of our attempts to make some practical sense of the relationship between art and living, between ideas and the complex details of consciousness and experience. Of course there can be no final answers to such questions, and so today I find Romie challenging me from beyond the limits of death and dying.

It was my good fortune to know Romie from my early days in New York. I met him when I was a fledgling writer working (some would say "boondoggling") on the Federal Writers Project, and when he was an unknown painter who worked for the New York Department of Welfare. At the time I knew very little about painting as such, but thanks to having taken a class in sculpture at Tuskegee and to my exposure to *avant garde* magazines, I had developed a more than casual interest in the visual arts. And I became even more interested once I realized that I had found in Romie an artist who could talk knowledgeably about my own passion, which was literature.

At the time I was very much involved with the poetry and plays of Federico Garcia Lorca. I discovered that Romie knew a great deal about Garcia Lorca. I was interested in the poetry of Eliot and the fiction of Hemingway, and I was delighted that they too had aroused his interest. Indeed, I soon discovered that Romie knew about many matters that I in my naiveté hadn't expected a painter to know, and when I accepted that fact my life was unexpectedly enriched.

Earlier today I tried to think back to the circumstance through which I was prepared for my relationship with Romie, and by what stroke of fate I had been made ready for his impact upon my sensibilities. (Incidentally, I have no concrete idea as to how Romie was prepared for his contact with such an oddball as myself, but I suspect that reading played a part.) Nevertheless, as I thought back I realized that there had indeed been a forerunner of Romie in my life, and that my interest in drawing and painting went directly back to an older boy who lived next door.

This was in Oklahoma City and that boy, that hero of my childhood, filled his notebooks with cartoon characters who acted out visual narratives that I found far more interesting than those provided by the newspaper comic sections. More interesting because they were about *us*, about Negro boys like ourselves. He filled his notebooks with drawings which told the stories of Negro cowboys and rodeo stars like Bill Pickett, of detectives and gangsters, athletes, clowns and heroes. Indeed, he created such

*Mr. Ellison delivered this memorial address on April 6, 1988, at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City. The Editor expresses his deep appreciation to Mr. and Mrs. Ellison for providing this transcript for publication. Copyright © 1988 by Ralph Ellison. All rights reserved.

a variety of characters and adventures that our entire neighborhood took on a dimension of wonder. But for me the most amazing part was the fact that all this was done by someone I knew, by the fellow living just next door who allowed me to look on as he gave form to figures, scenes, and adventures on page after page of notebook paper. But then as my friend and I grew older Fate, the old "good-bad," struck our lives in its ever ambiguous way.

For there came a day when his father sat us down beneath their towering apricot tree and proceeded to teach him the trumpet and me the alto horn. For me this was a stroke of good fortune, but there's a question as to whether that was true for my friend. For while our community was highly enthusiastic in fostering music it lacked adults who might have encouraged my friend's artistic talents. And thus it was that he went on to become a musician and barber like his father. So it was in Romie that I found the fulfillment of my earlier friend's promise and the continuation of that most stimulating friendship. However, it was no mere duplication of past experience, for while Romie was more mature and intellectually curious he was no less generous in sharing his talent and in discussing his struggle for mastery with me.

I can remember visits to Romie's 125th Street studio during which he stood at his easel sketching and explaining the perspectives of the Dutch and Italian masters. Other times he played with the rhythms of Mondrian and related them to the structure of jazz. And on still other occasions he explained some of the magic by which color became space, space became perspective, and color became form. He also had much to say about the nature of African sculpture . . .

It was his generosity in sharing such knowledge that made Romie Bearden such an affirmative figure in my own struggle to acquire writing skills. True, among my friends there was a world famous writer, and another, with whom I held endless discussions of our mutual craft, who would soon be widely acclaimed, but Romie's approach to art and his line of development seemed closer to my own. Thus when it seemed impossible that I would ever get anywhere with my writing I could talk with him, take heart from his progress, and feel encouraged. Better, I could observe and discuss his search for more effective techniques with which to give artistic form to his conceptions of our general experience. For each of us was concerned with the relationship between artistic technique and individual vision, and we were especially concerned with the relationship between our racial identity, our identity as Americans, and our mission as writer and artist.

Romie's father was a teller of tales and Romie—whose art at its most abstract retains an element of narrative—enjoyed regaling his friends with folk tales. These tales arose out of a need to impose form upon experience and Romie's delight in them led me to realize that here again we shared a stream of Afro-American culture which I had received from my Oklahoma background and Romie from living in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and New York. This shared ancestral lore made for a level of unspoken communication which connected the past to the present, and of course we shared many of the wide variety of experiences that were available during the Thirties. New York was a center of opportunity in which the aspiring could form contacts with recognized artists and writers. And libraries, art galleries, and museums were there to be used by those with the curiosity and interest to use them. And we did.

Those were also days of great excitement in Harlem, for in many ways it was still a place of glamour. Those were the days of the swinging Big Bands. Days when the streets of Harlem were filled with celebration every time Joe Louis knocked somebody out in the ring. Days when we danced the Lindy at the Savoy Ballroom, and nights when new stars were initiated on the stage of the Apollo Theater

Yes, but those were also the days of depression. Days of *dis*-possession and of protest marches. Harlem was growing edgy and Romie observed its effects most intimately through his work with the Welfare Department. There was a great turbulence growing in American society, much of it racial, and it became both a subject of our discussions and our artistic efforts. The question was, how did one express it in art? How sharpen its impact, and render it artistically effective? How transform the dismal sociological facts into art? Many attempts were being made, and certain ideological formulas were recommended as solutions, but I myself felt that they were reductive, that they overemphasized the negative aspects of our condition while leaving unnoticed the tragic-comic transcendence through which we had survived and remained hopeful, both as individuals and as a people. Most of all, such ideological formulas sought to reduce our complex American identity to the single aspect of race. And I suspected, and Romie's work affirmed, that perhaps there were other ways of going about giving expression to the times. Perhaps the solution lay in other, more eclectic approaches. Art itself was a form of freedom, and there was a world of art complete with all the styles and complex techniques through which artists had confronted experience and given it artistic form. That world was ours to draw upon. Yes, and there were the rituals—religious, fraternal, social—through which our people had imposed order upon the chaos of their lives. And there were the interrelations between such rituals that were shared by Americans of various backgrounds to be drawn upon. Therefore the image of American society presented by the newspapers, magazines and radio often missed much of the sheer human complexity of the life we knew. That life was marked by a ceaseless resistance against all attempts to reduce its complex humanity, whether by force or ideology, and by example it pointed a direction for the writer and artist. Thus each of us decided in his own way to find the artistic means with which to express our complex sense of American and Afro-American variety and diversity, discord and unity. And we decided that to do this one had to draw upon one's own unique experience. That one had to discover one's means and direction by going into the self, and by identifying one's self with all that claimed one's respect and aroused one's sense of wonder. In brief, we came to believe that it was the role of the artist to confront and impose his own artistic sense of order upon the world.

. . . .

Since there are hundreds of you gathered here who knew those times and who shared their hopes and disappointments there's no need for me to continue with this bit of background. For you know very well how it worked out for Romie. Some of the results, the paintings, are here in this cathedral. Some are in magazines, in books, and in many museums. They are in many places, and in all their settings they speak eloquently of a promise which goes far beyond the designs and figures displayed within their frames.

Over the years we have come to speak of Romie as "Bearden" and we recognize

him as a great master of collage. So now perhaps we should remind ourselves that we are a *collage of a Nation*, and a Nation that is ever shifting about and grouching as we seek to achieve the promised design of democracy. Therefore one of the reasons that *we* revere Romie is for his discovery that one of the ways for getting at many of the complex matters which we experience but seldom find recorded in official history is through art. Because Art is the mystery which gets left out of history.

We are thankful to have known him, and to have shared some of his discoveries. And of this we are certain: we shall be discovering more and more about Bearden and his work as we discover more about—and accept the responsibility of confronting—the wonderful complexity of American life.